

Kyianytsia L. The conflict potential of inter-state relations in the Middle East after the ‘Arab Spring’: the current state and prospects of development

The development of the contemporary system of international relations in the Middle East is marked by a high intensity of the conflict-based type of interactions between key actor of the regional politics, which thereby has a negative impact on the relations between the Middle East and the rest of the world. This tendency may be said to have become especially acute in the aftermath of the 2010-2011 revolutionary upheaval in the Middle East which came to be known as the ‘Arab Spring’. While the influence of the Arab Spring on the dynamics of the Middle Eastern system of international relations has been explored in the works of many researchers, both Ukrainian and international, the specificity of post-Arab Spring regional political processes, especially the ones that unfolded in the second half of the decade of 2010s, has often been overlooked. Therefore, this article aims to analyze the specifics of the increasing conflict behavior and conflict potential in the relations between the region’s main actors in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, so as to be able to set out the contours of main coalitions and to sketch some of the scenarios of further regional development.

The research findings presented in this article may allow one to assume that the events of the Arab Spring initially led to the emergence of the rival pro-Saudi and Qatari-Turkish coalitions, with their main difference being their attitude toward the permissibility of regime change as a form of political regulation, with Iran being relatively marginalized. However, the emergence of the ‘Islamic State of Iraq and Levant’ led to the relative and temporary blurring of inter-coalitional differences, while the Syrian Civil War, which was used by both coalitions as the scene of their proxy war against the pro-Iranian Assad regime, was disrupted by Russia’s intervention in favor of Assad. Simultaneously, the left-wing Kurdish forces took their opportunity and proclaimed their own political formation, known as Rojava, which has in turn secured the U.S. backing. Likewise, Turkey distanced itself from the U.S. after the latter’s ambiguous position in regard of the 2016 failed coup d’etat which risked toppling Erdogan’s government. In addition, the U.S. support for Rojava would further aggravate Turkey’s concerns.

More importantly, the rise of ISIL enabled Iran to break through its previous diplomatic isolation and establish closer ties with both Iraqi and Syrian authorities for the sake of fighting against ISIL, while in Yemen the pro-Iranian Houthis took over the state power, to be attacked in turn by the Saudi-led Gulf Arab states’ coalition. With Iran’s backing, Iraq has meanwhile managed to destroy ISIL forces on its soil and even to tame the powerful Iraqi Kurdistan separatist movement. In contrast, Libya remains in chaos, with several factions claiming to be its legitimate national government and the refugee crisis continuing unabated. Finally, Qatar has become isolated among the Gulf states, with only Turkey lending a hand of help to that small emirate as a counter-balance to Saudi influence. To summarize, the processes currently unfolding in the Middle East, collectively known as the ‘Arab Winter’, tend to foster further conflict and strife between the region’s key players. Therefore, the article ends with the conclusion that a further growth in conflict potential appears to be the surest prediction as to the future dynamics of Middle East’s regional development.

Key words: Middle East, ‘Arab Spring’, ‘Arab Winter’, conflict potential, diplomatic crisis.